

The Trail of Tears and Southern Illinois Parks

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The Trail of Tears was the long arduous path of the Cherokee nation during its forced removal from the ancestral home. This trail and the memories left behind played a critical role in the development of parks in southern Illinois. Several parks have been established along the trail as memorials to the Cherokee that passed through.

The Cherokee people, native to Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama, were forced upon this trail from their homes to Oklahoma in the late 1830s. Since the time of early white settlers, the Cherokee had assimilated the transplanted European cultures and the newly developed American cultures rather well. Unfortunately, disputes began to arise over the Cherokees' claim to the land. The discovery of gold on Cherokee lands prompted many people to appeal to the national government for the removal and displacement of the Cherokee from their ancestral lands.

Initially, the Cherokee were able to hold their own against the onslaught of gold seekers and the unappreciative hand of Andrew Jackson, who relied heavily on the Cherokees during the Creek War. A Cherokee splinter group led by Major Ridge and his son John, called the Ridge Party, met with the federal government to discuss the idea of relocation. This meeting resulted in the creation of the New Echota Treaty which agreed to the removal of the Cherokee nation. Even though the Treaty was endorsed by a small minority of the Cherokee Nation, the federal government applied it indiscriminately and began the forced removal from ancestral lands.

As a part of this removal, the Cherokee people were granted \$5 million and land in Oklahoma as compensation. Much of this money was required just to finance the trip from Georgia to Oklahoma. The Cherokee were taken advantage of on numerous occasions and this money was extremely inadequate.

The Cherokees began to make their way to their new lands. They had to travel through several states in order to get there. During the winter of 1838 and 1839, the Cherokees went through Southern Illinois entering around Golconda, passing by Jonesboro, Dixon Springs, and Vienna and then exiting near Dutch Creek Crossing. Each of these towns was affected and are now near state parks or forests with recreational facilities.

Near Golconda, many Cherokees made use of the local ferry. Under normal conditions, a ferry trip was only 12 ½ cents, but the owner of Berry's Ferry charged \$1 for each person and made them wait for other customers. Some families took pity on the Cherokees such as that of Sarah Buel. Hungry Cherokees passed by her home and she graciously provided them with much needed food. Golconda lacks a major park, but is home to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Golconda Marina, which offers many recreational activities. Camping, hiking, and fishing are all activities that are enjoyed there. Also, the Marina offers one of the better ports on the Ohio River for pleasure boaters.

The Trail of Tears State Forest, near Jonesboro, has many park-like aspects. It offers camping, hiking, and hunting with varieties of wildlife and plants that compete with any other local parks. This Forest was so named to honor and recognize the Cherokee people that rested within four miles of the forest between the winter of 1838

and 1839. Ice in the Mississippi made crossing virtually impossible and forced them to camp there. Many died of exposure and harsh conditions.

In Field Cemetery, just south of the Dixon Springs State Park lies a granite stone. It stands as a memorial to those that did not survive the brutal trek. Near Vienna rests a monument in memorial of several Cherokees that had been brutally murdered and their bodies thrown into shallow graves. Townspeople had murdered them and attempted to make profit by suing the government for the removal of the bodies. Nearby lies another state park.

The sorrowful path of the Trail of Tears, as it wound its way through Southern Illinois, left marks and memories that have lasted until today. These marks have helped with the development and emphasis on parks in the region. Memories tied communities together and played a critical role in awareness of the need to preserve the memories. Many of the towns that share the bond of the trail have prominent park or park-like facilities where many other southern Illinois towns do not. [From Elizabeth Antonacci, "The Trail of Tears: The Cherokee Tribe."

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